

Stop Shooting Yourself

November 30, 2010

There are two things the Buddha taught us to learn how to tolerate. One is physical pain and the other is hurtful words. In learning to tolerate these things, how to endure them, it's not simply a matter of gritting your teeth. You want to learn how to analyze what it is about them that really pains the mind.

As it turns out, it's not the actual sensation of the pain or the painful words, but what the mind does with these things. That's really what makes deep inroads into the mind, which is why training the mind is such an important part of the practice. It's why training the mind is actually what enables us to overcome suffering.

Remember, there are two kinds of suffering. There's suffering in the three characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. That part can't be avoided. It's a necessary part of the world. The Buddha has you reflect on it to depersonalize the suffering, realizing that the nature of the body is such that it's leaving you open to pain all the time. All kinds of things can happen. As Ajaan Suwat said, "If you don't believe that, you can take an iron spike and stick it in any part of your body, and it's going to hurt." The body leaves you open to all kinds of attacks: disease, accidents, whatever. This is just a part of having a body.

The same holds true with hurtful words. The Buddha says that there are basically two kinds of speech, pleasant speech and unpleasant speech. He divides them into different ways of being pleasant and unpleasant. There's well-meaning and ill-meaning speech, harsh and gentle, timely and untimely, true and false. These categories of speech can be found all over the world. So when you're the person to whom untimely, unkind, untrue, ill-meaning speech is directed, there's nothing really strange about that. This is part of the human condition.

Ajaan Fuang had a student who was a nurse. She was very pretty and, as a result, she was the victim of a lot of jealous gossip from the other nurses in the hospital where she worked. One day, it was really getting to her. She went to meditate with Ajaan Fuang, who was in Bangkok at the time. As she was meditating, she had a vision of herself in a big hall of mirrors in which reflections of herself were heading off into infinity. The thought occurred to her: She'd probably been the victim of harsh speech many times, a victim of the gossip many, many lifetimes, and her feeling of oppression became even more overwhelming.

After leaving meditation, she went to mention this to Ajaan Fuang, hoping that he would console her, say something gentle and kind and reassuring. But he

said, “Well, it’s your fault. You wanted to be born as a human being. This is what you get.” It took her aback. But afterwards, she said it really did help. This is just part of the human world. So what are you going to do? This is the way things are. The body leaves us open to pain, and our ears leave us open to hurtful speech.

One thing, as I said, is to learn how to depersonalize it.

In terms of the harsh, hurtful speech, it’s not only that there are these types of speech. The Buddha actually has you contemplate: When someone says something harsh, just leave it at the level of the sound. “An unpleasant sound is making contact at the ear.” Most of us don’t let it stop right there. We start thinking about the other person’s intentions—“Why are they saying this?”—and how insulted we feel, or how disrespectful the other person seems. That’s building a lot of suffering up around the bare sensation.

This is where you get into the suffering that’s not just part of the three characteristics; it’s part of the four noble truths. This is the suffering that really digs deep inside. And that’s the suffering, as the Buddha said, that comes from craving and clinging. We crave for things to be a certain way. Then we cling to our notions of how they should be, and we suffer when they’re not.

This is where we’re shooting ourselves with more arrows. The first pain is one arrow, but then we take a whole quiver of arrows and keep shooting ourselves over the physical pain or the harsh words. But it turns out that those arrows with which we shoot ourselves are the ones that really hurt the mind. As the mind gets more still, as its concentration and discernment gets stronger, you really begin to see that the physical pain doesn’t have to invade the mind. We pull it in—to use another image—or we use the perception of the pain to shoot ourselves.

Part of the problem is that we’re used to feeding on these things. So to help us stop suffering in this way, the Buddha gives us other things to feed on. That way, the practice is not just a matter of gritting your teeth and bearing it. You learn to develop the discernment that allows you to make these distinctions, and in the meantime, you find other things to focus on. You learn how to focus on your strengths. You learn how to focus on things that *are* going well.

Think of Punna, the monk who was going to go to a rough, uncivilized part of India, and first went to say farewell to the Buddha. The Buddha asked him, “Are you ready to go to that place? The people there are said to be very uncivilized. What if they say nasty things to you?”

Punna said, “Well, I’ll console myself by saying, ‘At least they’re not hitting me’.”

“What if they hit you?”

“I’ll tell myself, ‘At least they’re not throwing stones at me’.”

“What if they throw stones at you?”

“I’ll say, ‘At least they’re not stabbing me’.”

“What if they stab you?”

“I’ll tell myself, ‘At least they’re not killing me’.”

“What if they kill you?”

He said, “I’ll tell myself, ‘At least my death wasn’t a suicide.’”

And the Buddha said, “Okay, you’re ready to go then.”

You learn how not to hurt yourself over other people’s behavior. This is one of the reasons why we also develop concentration: to give ourselves an alternative, something better to focus on. There’s the ease in the body that can come from working with the breath. Even though there are pains in different parts of the body, there are places in the body that you *can* make comfortable with the breathing. If the body were nothing but pain, you’d die.

So as long as you’re alive, there’s someplace in the body where you can focus. If it’s not immediately apparent, then you can think of all the space around the body, the space permeating the body. That gives you an alternative object to hold in mind, and it gives you strength. It gives you a sense of ease that you can depend on, that you can use for nourishment so that you’re not feeding solely on the pain.

The Buddha also recommends that you develop universal goodwill. There was one time when Devadatta tried to kill the Buddha and rolled a big rock down the mountain at him. The rock ran into an obstacle and broke into pieces, and one of the pieces went right through the Buddha’s foot. He had this sliver of rock through his foot. So they removed the sliver. He lay down to rest, and the pains were really sharp.

Mara came to see the Buddha and started taunting him for being sad and miserable over his pain. The Buddha said, “I’m not sad and miserable. I’m spreading goodwill to all beings.” That was the Buddha’s way of dealing with pain: to spread goodwill to all beings. That’s how he endured the pain. It’s a useful technique because you’re not focused on the pain. You’re not focused on, “Why me?” or “Why did that person do this to me?” You’re letting your mind be larger than the pain.

This connects with that teaching on not suffering from your past karma, by developing a limitless mind like the water in a river. You could put a big lump of salt into the river, and as long as the river is clean, the fact that there’s so much water means you can still drink the water. Not like the water in a cup: If you put that lump of salt into the water in the cup, it’d be undrinkable. So here, the Buddha is giving an example of how he used this principle. He lay down in pain, but he wasn’t focused on the pain. He was focused on goodwill to all beings,

including the person who had rolled the rock down to begin with. He could reflect also on the fact that this was, in some way, the result of his past kamma that he was subject to this.

What the Buddha's recommending is that you develop the areas in the body where there is pleasure so that you can have something to feed on aside from physical pain or the nasty words that are said to you. It's the same principle as in that book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, in which the author recommends that if you're going to draw a face, don't draw the eyes, or the nose, or the mouth. Draw the spaces between the eyes, the nose, and the mouth. Draw the space between the eye and the eyebrow, and the space between the eyebrow and the top of the forehead. By doing this, you're going to get a much better likeness because you're not focusing on preconceived symbols and ideas of what an eye or a mouth should look like. You're actually looking more carefully at what's really there.

So instead of the mind's normal policy of focusing immediately on the pains, look at the area around them. Make that area as large and as comfortable as you can, physically through the breath and mentally through goodwill. In that way, you develop the nourishment that can allow you to be patient with things, to endure things like physical pain or unkind words, without being overwhelmed by them and not having to suffer from them.

You stop shooting yourself with the arrows that you normally shoot yourself with. There's just the one arrow of the pain. And when it's just that, you find, it's a lot easier to bear.